

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM**  
**CONGRESSMAN TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN**



**NEWS RELEASE**

**For Immediate Release**  
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**Davis: Defining Educational ‘Legitimacy’ the Key to**  
**Eliminating Employee Use of Bogus Degrees**

*In letter to OPM, Chairman Lauds Steps Taken, But Points Out Need for More*

Washington, D.C. – As part of his ongoing inquiry into the use of bogus education credentials by federal employees, House Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) sent a letter today to Office of Personnel Management Director Kay Coles James commending steps OPM is taking to address the “diploma mill” issue -- but also suggesting that the primary focus must remain on defining what constitutes “legitimate educational achievement.”

“OPM and Director James deserve high praise for the steps they’re taking to help agencies weed-out applicants and employees who present academic degrees from bogus institutions,” Davis said. “But with this letter I want to refocus on an important point: to truly get a handle on this problem, we first need a framework for distinguishing legitimate schools from illegitimate ones, a plan for tracking legitimacy over time, and a way to get this information to all federal employers.”

A copy of the letter follows:

April 30, 2004

The Honorable Kay Coles James  
Director  
United States Office of Personnel Management  
1900 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20415-0001

Dear Director James:

As Chairman of the Committee on Government Reform, I was pleased to see your plans for addressing the ongoing problem of federal employees obtaining and using fake degrees from diploma

mills. The thought and effort demonstrated by your new policies are very evident, and I appreciate this work.

I agree with you completely that federal employees who use fake degrees deceive the public, pose a national security threat, and mislead citizens as to their levels of qualification. As the availability of fake degrees becomes more widespread, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) will need to become more vigilant in its efforts to ensure that the federal workforce has integrity.

Critical to these efforts are your plans to review and revise employment and background forms to require job hunters and employees to distinguish between academic credentials from accredited schools and educational accomplishments from other organizations. Revisions to these forms must compel applicants and employees to disclose fully the nature and extent of their educational backgrounds.

It is also exciting to hear OPM will expand its oversight of issues related to diploma mills by hiring extra staff to oversee the adjudication and conduct follow-up personnel background investigations. These steps will begin to establish a zero tolerance culture for the federal workforce.

I am sure you agree, however, that these two steps alone may not be sufficient to eliminate the use of diploma mill degrees by the federal workforce. I am most concerned that federal employers may not have access to information that would allow them to determine whether a degree represents legitimate educational achievement. Moreover, it would be important for such information to track an educational institution's legitimacy over time – an institution that was a diploma mill 20 years ago may have gained accreditation or an institution that was accredited 20 years ago may have devolved into a diploma mill. In either case, a federal job applicant or employee might claim a degree from an accredited institution that was not accredited at the time of the issuance of the degree, which might not be detected by OPM or agency investigators.

It is also not enough to catch current federal employees using these degrees. At that point, they may already have obtained their employment or promotion through the use of the degree or have represented to the public or colleagues that they have an expertise they do not have. The federal government needs a resource that will let employers know whether a degree is a real degree or not. Also, such a resource would benefit federal employees by letting them search institution names to see whether a degree from a particular institution would be considered a diploma mill by their employer.

I also urge you to consider how to give appropriate recognition to educational achievements at schools that are not diploma mills but are also not accredited. There are plenty of schools that are not accredited but, nevertheless, provide legitimate educational programs. Many universities choose to forego accreditation for legitimate reasons. Some schools lose accreditation in a particular program, but maintain general accreditation. And some schools are just too new to be accredited, yet. More work is needed to make sure that all persons who have studied hard to get degrees are not precluded from federal service.

Accordingly, pursuant to Rules X and XI of the U.S. House of Representatives, please provide the Committee with the following documents:

1. Documents related to or containing any government-wide strategy or plan for informing federal employers about whether a particular institution or organization is, or is not, a diploma mill, including whether an institution was or was not a diploma mill at a particular point in time.
2. Documents related to or containing any plans for tracking the accreditation status of schools.

3. Documents related to or containing any plans for ensuring that persons claiming degrees from unaccredited institutions are not disqualified from federal service on the basis of nonaccreditation alone or their representation of educational accomplishment on the basis of the unaccredited degree.

Documents produced in response to these requests should include publications, memoranda, or other documents reflecting or relating to OPM's policies and plans on these matters that you think would be helpful to the Committee.

Thank you for your timely attention to our request and this matter.

Sincerely,

Tom Davis

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